



Boom or bust for the multi-million dollar business of counterfeit art

Art has become a favorite investment among those looking to shore up their cash, creating a market for forgeries often good enough to fool experts. Germany's federal police this week exposed an entire ring of forgers.

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"Supremus" is the title of one of the paintings impounded during the latest art forgery raids this week, which took place in Germany, Israel, and Switzerland. It is thought to be by Kazimir Malevich, a Russian avant-garde painter, but whether it is really by him is another matter. Altogether, German federal police officers have found more than 1,000 objects in the past week during raids on private apartments. A further 400 forgeries of paintings by Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky and Alexej von Jawlensky are thought to have been sold already - mainly to private collectors abroad.



According to estimates, two of the suspected forgers made two millions euros (\$2.7 million) between 2011 and 2013 alone.

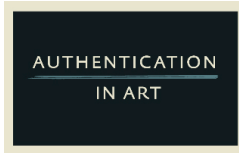
More art enthusiasts, more forgeries

Forgery scandals reoccur regularly. One of the biggest recent cases in Germany was that of Wolfgang Beltracchi, who, with his accomplices, is thought to have earned at least 16 million euros from the trade in forged classic modern paintings.

One of his forgeries, of the "Red Picture with Horses" by Rhineland expressionist Heinrich Campendonk, was sold at auction for close to 2.9 million euros. A forged Max Ernst painting by Beltracchi even fooled the art historian Werner Spies, considered an Ernst specialist. After a highly public trial in Cologne in 2011, Beltracchi was eventually sentenced to six years in prison.

Art historian Susanna Partsch argues that the market for forged paintings has grown in proportion to the general interest in art. As author of the book "Tatort Kunst" ("Crime Scene: Art"), Partsch has been studying the history of forged artworks for several years.

"It started in the baroque era, though the market was still very small then," she told DW. "It only became big in the 19th century, when museums were founded - including in the US - and the Americans, who did not have such a long history as the Europeans, began buying art in Europe." Italy developed a particularly big market for art forgeries.



Economic crisis, forgery boom

And the interest in art continues to grow. Art fairs like Documenta or the Biennale are enjoying a boom. Katia Baudin, deputy director of Cologne's Museum Ludwig, thinks that the recent global financial crisis may well have increased interest in art as an investment. For many, it might seem safer to invest in a painting than in property or stocks.

Forgers supply the market with whatever it demands - provided, of course, it can be forged. "There are artists who simply can't be forged," said Partsch. "Like Paul Klee. Because Klee kept exact records of his works from the beginning."

On the other hand, the Russian avant-garde movement is a forger's favorite, because it is far from unlikely that works by these artists disappeared during the Russian Revolution or the Stalin era, only to be re-discovered much later.

"Some of these artists were persecuted in Stalin's times, after all," Baudin said. That means that some of their works disappeared - in the best case, into the cellars of museums, in the worst case, they simply disappeared completely.

A 30-euro Mona Lisa? No problem

Even if many European cases were successfully uncovered, there are plenty of art forgeries across the world.

"In China there is a whole village that produces official copies to order," Partsch said. "A Mona Lisa for 30 euros? No problem. It's well-known that dealers and fences go there, make orders, and then sell the pictures as originals in Europe or America."

Without a scientific test, it is often difficult to identify forgeries. According to Partsch, the few restoration and testing workshops that there are, like the Doerner Institute in Munich, "are hopelessly overbooked, so it takes a long time for an artwork to be tested."

Baudin also underlines the importance of such scientific checks. Cases like that of Beltracchi, she pointed out, have shown that the expertise of art historians who only look at the surface is no longer enough.

Ultraviolet radiation can reveal whether a work has been restored, while infrared rays expose the artist's original drawings under the paint. As recent developments have shown, such tests might be expensive and time-consuming, but they're necessary.